

# Interview with...

## Simon O'Neill

Planning Director, Supply Chain Europe

H J Heinz Co Ltd

[www.heinz.co.uk](http://www.heinz.co.uk)



## On what it takes to be a Supply Chain Planning Director

**Confidentiality:** the information contained in this document may be privileged and confidential. No parts of this document may be used or reproduced without the express agreement of Hughenden Limited.

*Heinz is the most global U.S.-based food company, with a world-class portfolio of powerful brands holding number-one and number-two market positions in more than 50 countries. The Heinz brand is a \$2.5 billion global icon and Heinz's top-15 power brands account for two-thirds of annual sales. Today, Heinz brands are cultural icons to consumers everywhere, symbolizing quality, convenience and great taste. The Heinz products are available in over 200 countries.*

*Whether based on stereotypes or truths, we all have an image in our mind of the typical Sales Director, or the typical Finance Director. But what are the strengths and attributes of the typical Supply Chain Planning Director? Although a recent addition for many companies, he is becoming a key player, with influence across the disciplines.*

*Hughenden has had the pleasure of supporting Heinz in Supply Chain improvements, so we asked Simon O'Neill to tell us what he thinks it takes to be a Supply Chain Planning Director.*

**Q:** Which parts of your background and experience have been key to attain your current role?

**A:** “I actually started out studying Chemistry, at Manchester University. I guess that it is because it suited my inquisitive mind. I like to challenge things and tackle problems. I am very analytical, which is extremely useful in my role today. When I joined Heinz, I was a Planner for Baked Beans. I then moved onto a variety of roles, including Factory Planning, Finance, Business Development and Factory Management.

One of my great early experiences was in the development of our Packaging Strategy. This is when I got to understand the real growth in complexity of packaging formats. I got to talk to our customers and suppliers and develop a clearly aligned

Operational Packaging Strategy. I was then asked to lead the implementation – integrating the Beans and Soup Packaging centres into one, at our largest factory in Europe. You see, Heinz has largely grown through the acquisition of factories, which were, in some cases, under-utilised. I was involved in and led a number of major restructuring projects that took a third of the factories out of our European network, and drove utilisation at some sites up from 50% to 90%, creating pan European Manufacturing Centres of Excellence.

My past experience with Sales & Operations Planning has also been invaluable. It was first developed in the UK but then I got to contribute to the European and Global process re-design and implementation.”

**Q:** Do you represent a new species of company leaders or are Supply Chain Planning Directors just a re-branded function?

**A:** “No, my role did not exist before. It was created seven years ago. At first, people did not see how a central Supply Chain Planning role would add value. Myself and my team initially faced much resistance. Back then, the perception was that we were the Head Office Supply Chain “experts”, the technical “geeks” that are then miraculously transformed into “World Class Fire Fighters” whenever a crisis emerged!

Now, the role is seen as pivotal in balancing the many tensions that exist between driving top line growth and optimising profitability. Like most businesses, we are torn between the short and the long term. My role is to push people to think longer term... It is making sure that the sites understand that we are trying to make optimal decision for the European business, for example sourcing decisions, which are aligned to our manufacturing strategy.”

**Q:** How would you describe the personality of a Supply Chain Planning Director?

**A:** “We definitely have to be thick-skinned! A bit like a referee! Although we sit in Operations, we also have a foot in the Commercial camps and require some real versatility to

operate at lots of different levels. Sometimes we need to take a helicopter view on things and try and influence very senior people; other times, we need to work at very detail level with factory schedulers.

The role also requires a very pro-active approach, a degree of healthy scepticism and an open personality because the focus is more and more on the outside world. By that I mean focussing more on our external customers, regularly seeking their feedback (*“is this what you really want?”*). I also mean seeking out Best Practice from others’ experience and transferring the knowledge back into the business.”

**Q: What challenges do you face, which you would consider unique to your role?**

**A:** “On a personal basis, the challenge is to acquire a comprehensive knowledge and understanding of both the operational and commercial sides of the business, so you can talk everybody’s language.

I think that for the role, the challenge is to optimise the flow of cash and the flow of material. The reality is that it is always a trade-off, a compromise – there is never an ideal solution. You are often caught somewhere between push and pull: on the one hand, you have the factories with their desire for mass production; on the other hand, you have the market with its increasing need for flexibility and responsiveness.

*“Agree a set of core principles that you will not compromise”*

Talking of flexibility, I quickly realised that a “one size fits all” approach does not work. What works in say the UK, will not necessarily work in other parts of Europe. So we are always looking to identify the core processes and find out how they can be adapted to suit local needs. And for that, I am a strong

believer in personal interaction. The textbooks are a start but they do not replace the personal relationship and experiences. The role of Supply Chain Planning Director is increasing in profile, but at the end of the day, you need to be able to look people in the eye, including the Board, and tell them that we got it wrong and, more importantly, what we need to do differently to fix it.”

**Q: What advice would you give to someone aspiring to this role?**

**A:** “They need to be prepared for a real roller-coaster ride! It is like in any job, but just more intense: if you succeed, you can make a real difference to the business and it is very satisfying; but if you get it wrong, then be prepared to hold up your hand and learn from the experience (always easier said than done!). I know that, in the past, people just used to “fall into” Planning roles. Now, there is some real credibility to the function, with industry awards and professional qualifications, and a genuine career path to attract and retain high calibre people.

But to make a real difference as a Supply Chain Planning Director, you have to be always willing to learn! For example, I have just gone through an intense 6-Sigma Black Belt training programme and I cannot wait to impart the principles I have learnt to my team! I also think that it is priceless to have worked in different parts of the business – functions and geographies – in order to be exposed to many different ways of doing things. From there, you must agree a set of core principles that you will not compromise on.”

**Q: So tell us: what does it take to be a Supply Chain Planning Director?**

**A:** “I think it takes a ruthless ability to prioritise, a real passion for the process and a desire to improve continuously. Recognise that you will never be an expert in all areas, so bring in some specialists from the outside to share insights on best fit of processes from other industries. Be prepared to break down barriers and work hard at developing influential relationships across teams and functions. Oh, and a good sense of humour always helps in standing back and trying to keep things in perspective!”

**Hughenden would like to thank Simon O’Neill**

for his contribution and honest answers.

[info@hughenden.net](mailto:info@hughenden.net) [www.hughenden.net](http://www.hughenden.net)